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October 16, 1972

MEMORANDUM FOR:

MR. HENRY A. KISSINGER  
ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT FOR  
NATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS

SUBJECT:

President Thieu's Probable Reaction to  
the Emerging Package

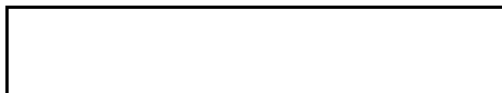
1. General Considerations. GVN President Nguyen Van Thieu's reaction to a settlement following the general outlines adumbrated in recent private negotiations will be conditioned by his weighting of at least five sets of considerations:

- (a) Questions of clarification
- (b) Questions of substance
- (c) Questions of cosmetics
- (d) Questions of atmospherics
- (e) Questions of timing

2. These various considerations clearly inter-relate and overlap. Their definition and relative importance is also very much a function of the point of reference in terms of which they are assessed -- what one party may consider a matter of cosmetics, for example, another may view as a question of major or even vital substance. So far as Thieu's reaction is concerned, the operative point of reference will be Thieu's -- and his perspective or angle of vision on many issues will be markedly different from ours or Hanoi's.

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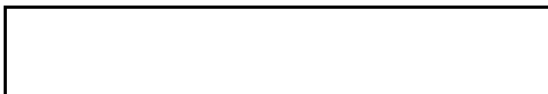
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3. Thieu's Basic Approach. Thieu will approach the package with considerable skepticism, profound suspicion of Hanoi's motives, and more than a little suspicion of our motives. These suspicions regarding Hanoi's motives, and ours, will swiftly translate to corresponding suspicions regarding Hanoi's proposals -- and ours. Thieu's basic outlook will be one of hard headed cynicism. He will start from the premise that Hanoi would not budge on points of substance unless the Communists were really hurting, and he would probably also reason that hurts sufficient to make Hanoi budge would have to be hurts of a degree and kind that Hanoi feared would soon be unconcealable. From such a premise, Thieu would be instinctively inclined to draw the conclusion that if Hanoi is hurting enough to budge, the Lao Dong politburo must feel itself under severe time-linked constraints -- constraints that give the US and GVN the whip hand if the latter are sensible enough not to squander their advantage. To Thieu, this -- in turn -- would mean that the US and GVN would be foolish to accept Hanoi's first real offers, or even Hanoi's first set of fall-back propositions. If Hanoi is already giving substantive ground -- Thieu would reason -- a stiffened or stiffening allied position would soon impel Hanoi to give more.

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4. A second basic premise coloring Thieu's whole outlook will be that the Communists are deceitful, wily and unprincipled. Prima facie, any package they propose "must" (by definition) be full of cunningly concealed booby traps and pitfalls. The Communists (in Thieu's eyes) will unquestionably try, wherever possible, to exchange concrete -- and easily monitored -- GVN/US performance or actions for vague, ambiguously phrased Communist promises or "understandings." Furthermore, Thieu regards Hanoi's word (again, almost by definition) as worthless. Hence he would consider even reasonably concrete Communist commitments as empty and relatively meaningless unless nailed down by a workable inspection and complaint adjudication mechanism.

5. Thieu almost certainly trusts President Nixon's administration more than he ever trusted President Johnson's. In this context, however, "trust" is a relative term, not an absolute one. Thieu probably does not think the present US Administration would deliberately scuttle him or sell him down the river, but he clearly believes that in the heat of US Presidential election period, South Vietnam's vital interests -- which Thieu is strongly inclined to equate with his interests -- are of much less concern to the US Government than domestic US political considerations. Also -- with a kind of private arrogance that often serves as a carapace for felt inferiority -- Thieu considers

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"Americans" more simplistic and naive than the "subtle" Vietnamese. In this vein, Thieu appears to have convinced himself that Hanoi is skillfully manipulating the Americans "transparent" hunger for an early settlement. (If Thieu were a reader of Talleyrand, he would doubtless underline the latter's maxim of "pas trop de zèle.")

6. Clarification Questions. Operating with the outlook sketched above, Thieu will approach any Hanoi package -- or US package Hanoi has putatively endorsed -- in the spirit of a flint-eyed mortgage banker coldly scrutinizing a complex loan application from a known poor credit risk. For openers, Thieu will want most -- ideally all -- of the blanks filled in, with i's dotted and t's crossed. To cite a few illustrative random examples (and this is not a comprehensive list); Thieu would press strongly for clear answers to the following sorts of questions.

a. What is meant by a ceasefire "in place"? Who determines who is in place where at any given time? Whose maps are used?

b. How is US "withdrawal" defined?

c. Are GVN personnel held captive by the Communists to be included in any prisoner exchange?

d. What happens to North Vietnamese Army units in South Vietnam? (Remember that the GVN's Joint General Staff now classes

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e. How are Hanoi's guarantees of "withdrawal from Laos" and an "end to infiltration" to be monitored?

f. Ditto for the Communists' promised abandonment of Laotian and Cambodian sanctuaries. What happened to their supply stockpiles, logistics depots and Binh Tram system in Laos and Cambodia?

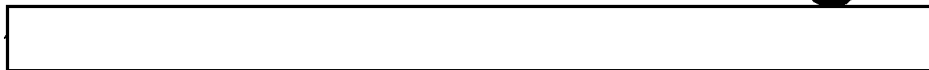
g. How do the package's provisions regarding "replacement of equipment" impinge on the GVN's future capabilities? Would they preclude upgrading, say, the GVN's artillery inventory (e.g., by replacing 105s with 155s and 175s)? Even more, would they preclude the GVN's acquiring the air and anti-aircraft resources it needs to stand more or less alone against the DRV?

7. Substantive Questions. Even if Thieu is genuinely trying to be cooperative -- and not simply bent on scuttling any negotiated settlement at this time -- once he has obtained what he considers minimally essential clarifications on key points in the emerging package, Thieu will have a number of major substantive issues to ponder. These will include issues such as the following (and again, this is an illustrative list, not a comprehensive one):

a. What would the GVN's territorial position be in the environment of an "in place" cease-fire? This question, incidentally, would loom very large at this immediate moment. At this writing, the

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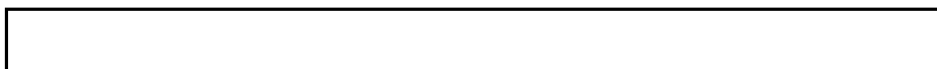
Communists have significant units active close to Saigon, and on at least three sides of the GVN's capital. Thieu simply could not -- and would not -- agree to an "in place freeze" that left his capital a surrounded island.

b. How would the fact, and the image, of GVN sovereignty be affected by the settlement package's "political arrangements"? We might consider them a facade or minimal figleaf masking a substantive Communist surrender, but Thieu might see these "arrangements" in a very different light.

c. What would the proposed package's real and net impact be on relative GVN and Communist military capabilities at the time of implementation? One year hence? Over the indeterminate future?

8. Cosmetic Questions. In Vietnam as elsewhere (but sometimes particularly so in Vietnam), political appearances transmute into political reality. Hence, distinctions between what is "substantive" and what "cosmetic", though valid, are often regarded -- at least by the Vietnamese -- as largely irrelevant. Thieu might be willing to be forthcomingly flexible and realistic (at least by his lights) on the practical mechanics of cease-fire and accomodation, but he is unlikely to back off a micromilemeter from his public claim to sovereignty and lawful jurisdiction

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over all of South Vietnam's people and all of its territory. He is also most unlikely to be willing to take any public posture beyond "benign neglect" -- i. e. turning a blind eye -- on aspects of the settlement package he deems practically workable but cosmetically unpalatable. At best, Thieu's public posture toward settlement will be ambivalent (and he will argue that given the realities of the Vietnamese psyche and its interacting impact on the realities of Vietnamese politics, his posture has to be ambivalent): He may be willing to play the role of enlightened statesman, taking undeniable risks and making great sacrifices in the higher cause of peace. If so, however, the enlightened statesman will also portray himself, at least to his own domestic audience, as a magnanimous victor. Thieu will be convinced that the risks a settlement inevitably entails are manageable -- and domestically saleable -- only if presented as the risks a strong victor can afford to take, thus highlighting both his strength and his victory.

9. One area of major "cosmetic concern" to Thieu will be the way any settlement's structure and manner of implementation affects his domestic image vis-a-vis the Communists. Another area of at least equally great concern will be the way a settlement would affect his domestic and international image vis-a-vis the United States. Here, the impact and import of the way the settlement was (or appeared to be)

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reached and implemented would loom at least as large in Thieu's eyes as the settlement's actual substantive provisions. Thieu will never knowingly or willingly let himself be maneuvered into looking like a servile U. S. puppet. His image of independence vis-a-vis the U. S. is as important to his psyche -- and essential to his political survival -- as his image of strength vis-a-vis the communists. Thus Thieu will certainly insist that any settlement package looks to the world like a joint US/GVN proposal which Hanoi has accepted (or, as Thieu will doubtless imply, been forced to accept). He will simply refuse to acquiesce in any arrangement or scenario that could be construed as suggesting that South Vietnam's future was arranged in private negotiations between Washington and Hanoi, without Thieu's active participation. The image essential to Thieu's self-esteem -- and, again, political survival -- will be that in the private talks, the US participants (chiefly Dr. Kissinger) served as the GVN's attorney, actively representing the interests of a mature, responsible and powerful client -- not, in any sense, as the legal wards or trustees of a client who was legally incompetent.

10. Atmospheric Questions. In the kaleidoscopic world of Vietnamese politics, substantive issues recombine into cosmetic questions and these, in turn, into atmospheric ones. Within South Vietnam, Thieu will consider it essential that the evolution and implementation of a settlement be conducted in, and reinforce, an atmosphere of -- at a



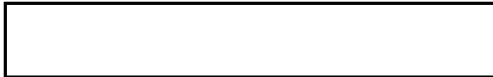
minimum -- victorious stand-off against the Communist foe, never an atmosphere of GVN defeat and scuttling by its principal ally.

11. Such charged atmospheric considerations, in turn, will greatly affect Thieu's response to any US-proposed settlement package and the extent to which he is, or is not, willing to get on with the task of getting that package implemented. Thieu's behavior in October 1972, furthermore, will be heavily influenced by the way he was handled in October 1968, for the scar tissue over that deep wound is still very tender.

12. Rightly or wrongly, Thieu is absolutely convinced -- and I know this because he has told me so in private conversation -- that in 1968, the Johnson Administration tried to rush him into a disastrous arrangement that would have sacrificed South Vietnam's vital interests for US domestic political advantage. He resisted this effort then (successfully) and so long as he draws breath, he will resist what he sees to be a similar effort by any other US political party. Thieu, in short, will be hypersensitive to anything he perceives as even suggesting a re-run of October 1968. Thieu has a great penchant for repeating tactics that worked successfully in the past. He is convinced that in 1968, he saved South Vietnam (and himself) by stubborn intransigence.

13. The above does not mean that Thieu will be unreceptive to any US settlement proposal at this time, or that he will not be willing to

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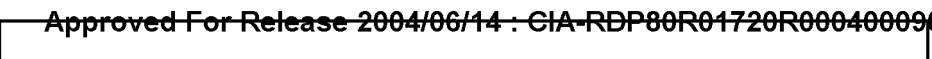
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cooperate in its implementation (provided he is convinced that South Vietnam's long term interests -- and his -- are thereby served). His mind will snap shut, however, and his emotions set in rock-hard concrete if the atmosphere surrounding the presentation of this proposal suggests a US urgency keyed to 7 November, or if that atmosphere hits his nostrils as in any way redolent of October 1968.

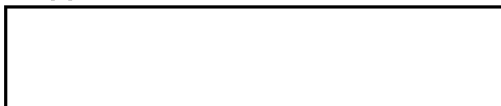
14. Timing Questions. The element of timing will weigh on Thieu's mind in at least two dimensions. First, the practical. He will want to cast a very sharp eye over the sequential phasing of any proposed settlement package's component parts. He will want to be sure neither the GVN nor the US is giving up too much too soon, or too irrevocably -- i. e., that resources for effective counter-action remain feasibly on tap during the period when actual Communist performance in carrying out their promised actions begins to provide some tangible clues regarding Hanoi's real sincerity and longer term intentions.

15. Secondly, Thieu's reading of the atmospheric considerations just discussed will be heavily influenced by the kind of timetable presented to him for pursuing and implementing the proposed settlement package. Also, Thieu will have some strong views of his own on how the sequential phasing of agreement on a settlement and implementation of its component parts ought to be handled to protect the GVN's vital substantive and imagistic interests.

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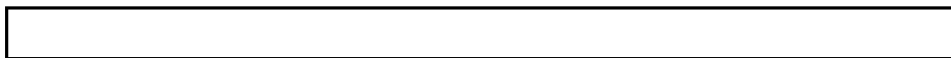
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16. Thieu's Probable Response to the Overall Game Plan. The emerging settlement package will constitute a large mouthful for Thieu to swallow -- in fact, several large mouthfulls. He may swallow it, but parts of it will be decidedly unpalatable and any swallowing will perforce be preceded by a considerable amount of inevitable, unavoidable chewing.

17. The emerging package probably contains the essence of what Thieu can recognize as a settlement with sufficient potential benefit for basic South Vietnamese interests to constitute an alternative preferable to continued war. Thieu will recognize this, however, only if he approaches the problem with clear eyes coldly fixed on real interests -- eyes unclouded by a sheen of suspicion or red haze of anger. If he stays on an even, rational keel, Thieu is a shrewd and realistic enough Vietnamese politician to recognize that despite its inevitable hazards and booby traps, the emerging package can be translated into something very close to Communist surrender. He is also shrewd enough to recognize that the very act of tabling this proposal, even in its present form, strongly suggests there either has been or soon will be a major realignment of North Vietnamese (i. e. Politburo) political forces.

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This, in turn, would suggest to Thieu the possibility of a relationship with Hanoi which -- if properly nurtured and handled -- could come to resemble the evolving pattern of relationships between Seoul and Pyongyang.

18. Even if he approaches the problem with an open mind and a maximum amount of good will, however, the current outline package will make Thieu very skittish. He will have a number of questions that he will regard as essential and legitimate. He will regard as eminently reasonable, and equally legitimate, an insistence that many of these questions must be answered or clarified before any more moves are made in this game. (One thing he will insist be "clarified" -- i. e., eliminated -- is any acquiescence in a Communist military presence on the outskirts of Saigon.) Thieu's gravest reservations, of course, will probably be focused on the internal political arrangements and their impact on GVN sovereignty, the territorial allocation issue, the continued presence (and role) in South Vietnam of the North Vietnamese Army, and the types of resupply, modernization and improvement that will become realistically feasible for the ARVN vis-a-vis the NVA. On the other hand, a clear-eyed Thieu (but not an incensed one) will quickly perceive how close the Hanoi offer is, or could be made to be, to the joint GVN/US proposal of 25 January 1972, President Nixon's 8 May position, and even Thieu's own public position as enunciated in his 2 October message to the National Assembly.



19. The trick, hence, is to keep Thieu clear-eyed. In this context, any proposal for a visit by Dr. Kissinger to Hanoi to ratify or solemnize the agreement becomes a very dicey and radioactive proposition. Whatever be his outward demeanor, Thieu's instinctive initial reaction to any such proposal will be that it is a totally unnecessary grandstand play, incapable of doing any good, likely to do great harm and a gambit whose very suggestion raises grave questions about U.S. motives. Thieu may have second and third thoughts of a more reasonable nature, but ones such as these will inevitably be his instinctive first ones.

20. If Dr. Kissinger were to proceed to Hanoi over Thieu's strong objections -- whether the latter be overtly expressed or transparently manifest even though not explicitly stated -- virtually all chance of obtaining Thieu's active cooperation would thereby be eliminated. The fact of this major disagreement, and its outcome, would be bound to leak out, with decidedly adverse consequences for Thieu's political position, the GVN's cohesion, and the prospects for anti-Communist Vietnamese in any subsequent political or military struggle with their Communist adversaries.

21. This is not to say that Thieu would necessarily be unshakeably opposed to Dr. Kissinger's capping a successfully negotiated settlement with a symbolic visit to Hanoi. Though Thieu's reflex, instinctive response to any such proposal (when it is initially broached)

will almost certainly be negative, this does not mean his position will necessarily remain negative. If -- a very big "if" -- Thieu does not make a negative verbal response when this idea is first broached (i.e., a response putting him on a limb from which he cannot climb down without losing face), it may be possible to bring Thieu around to the view that such a dramatic gesture would redound to his, and the GVN's, long-term interests.

22. There is no chance whatsoever of bringing Thieu around to any such view unless the atmosphere of any discussions with him is cordial as well as businesslike. And there is little chance of generating or preserving the necessary atmosphere if Thieu senses himself rushed or hurried as he was in October 1968. This does not mean that Thieu cannot be presented with cogent arguments for urgency, for moving briskly to nail Hanoi's leaders down before they or their minds are changed. Thieu will, however, surely jump the rails if he feels our sense of urgency is primarily generated by the rapid approach of 7 November.

23. Given the above, the chances are minimal of Thieu's acquiescing in any scenarios that would have Dr. Kissinger in Paris on Tuesday, Saigon on Wednesday and Hanoi on Saturday. Such a foreshortened timetable is just too compressed for Thieu's psyche, or political position, to take. The best feasible scenario would measure

this sequence of events in days or (more likely) a few weeks, not hours. Even if Thieu is as forthcoming and cooperative as it is possible for him to be -- given his temperament and situation -- it is hard to envisage him going beyond (or not proposing) something more like this: Paris on Tuesday, Saigon on Wednesday. Several days (say four or five) of intensive discussions in Saigon jointly evolving an allied position on what needs to be clarified and/or met with a counter offer. Once an agreed US/GVN position is reached -- i.e., an offer Thieu genuinely regards as "agreed" (not rammed down his throat) -- back to Paris for a "final" (ideally) session with Le Duc Tho, a session which itself could last for several days and (again ideally) would resolve or clarify the major items we and/or the GVN considered essential unfinished business. Once that package, perhaps as further modified in these "final" Paris sessions, is chopped by Le Duc Tho, back to Saigon for final accord from Thieu and perhaps then -- but only then -- on to Hanoi for symbolic signing.

24. Under suitable pressure which nonetheless does not make him jump ship, Thieu could probably be brought around to agreement and genuine cooperation on a scenario recognizably resembling that just sketched. (Saying this is a lot easier than doing it will be.) Implementing this scenario, however, would probably require at least two or three weeks -- not five or six days. Even a cooperative Thieu would be certain to argue -- and not without reason -- that any faster scenario

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would inevitably risk making unnecessary concessions to Hanoi.

Thieu's point would be that if Hanoi is hurting as much as its current offer suggests, Hanoi may be at least as anxious for settlement as we, perhaps even more so. There would thus be an odds-on chance of the Communists giving even more substantive ground if hit with a starchy "final" set of counter proposals, which the US -- as brokers -- could offer in good faith (and with great benefit to the allied cause and its overall image) as the "most" the GVN could possibly accept. This, in any event, is the line Thieu will probably take with you in Saigon even if he is honestly trying to be as cooperative as he feels he can be, all factors considered.

George A. Carver, Jr.

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